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World Chronicle

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WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME (WFP)

Catherine BERTINI, Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), describes the activities and responsibilities of WFP in combating hunger and providing food relief aid to those in need. WFP is the only UN agency whose primary role is to distribute food to save the lives of people caught up in humanitarian crises. It also provides food for work to create employment and improve the economic situation, and it provides food in projects targeting children, women and the elderly. WFP supports development projects benefitting women, and provides grant assistance for environmental protection and development. According to Ms. Bertini, WFP has appointed its own inspector-general to fight corruption and food leakage.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

In spite of today's technological advances and economic growth, hundreds of millions of people are hungry and suffer from malnutrition – most of them women and children in third world countries. The lack of sufficient food, if it continues, will have a devastating impact on future generations in many parts of the world. There is an urgent need to ensure that enough food is available to all human beings regardless of where they live. Hunger is indefensible in a world of plenty.

Our guest today has a special interest in the availability of food. She is Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme, or WFP. Joining me to talk with Ms. Bertini are Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*.

Ms. Bertini, welcome to World Chronicle.

BERTINI: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tell us a bit about the World Food Programme. How do you operate? In how many countries? Where do you get your resources? We hear about the mountain of butter in the United States and surplus food and so forth, yet there seems to be a shortage elsewhere, which you're trying to alleviate. How do you go about it?

BERTINI: Well, the World Food Programme is the UN's front-line agency fighting hunger. And it has probably the largest budget of any single agency in the system. Last year we spent about $1.2 billion; in the last few years it's been as high as $1.9 billion US dollars. And we accept food donations, mostly from Governments, and we do assessments of the needs in the poorest countries of the world, for the poorest people and also for people living amidst conflict and for refugees, and then we provide the food assistance, based on totally voluntary contributions.

LITTLEJOHNS: And you give the food away, or are you able to sell some of it?

BERTINI: Well, we do a lot of things with it. People in the midst of conflict receive food aid in order to keep them alive, we keep people alive with food aid. We provide food to any refugee population of over 5,000, so we work closely, for instance, with the UNHCR. We use food to help people grow, to reach people at critical times in their lives, when food is very important – for pregnant women, for instance, for children under five. And so that is food that's distributed directly to the individuals, perhaps through a school feeding programme or through health centres. But then we also use food for work, where we pay people with food rather than with cash, in order to build something constructive in their

community that they themselves have decided would be helpful for the long-term economic benefit of their community. Occasionally, we sell some of the food in order to provide some other implements, but it's a very tiny percentage of our food aid.

LITTLEJOHNS: Commodity prices tend to fluctuate, sometimes quite wildly. And if you're giving food away is there not a risk that you're going to be disrupting the price structures a bit?

BERTINI: Oh, we're very careful, we do very careful assessments so that we do not impede the economic well-being of any particular country. And if we learn that there's any prospect of that we immediately change our operations. In fact, we purchase food in developing countries; last year we spent over $100 million purchasing food in developing countries. And that of course is very important, not only to support the economic base, but also because it gets food to victims of war faster; it provides food that people are more likely used to, if it came from the region; and it usually saves on transport costs.

DEEN: Ms. Bertini, one of your primary objectives is to spend a good part of your resources on increasing agricultural production in third world countries – in Latin America, Asia, Africa. But I believe during the last few years your agency has been spending over 70 per cent of its resources on disaster relief.

BERTINI: Yes.

DEEN: How does this affect your development objectives?

BERTINI: Yes, that's a very good question, because it's very difficult to receive enough donations for reaching people through development. The world community is very generous when it comes to individuals who need food in order to live. But the development part of our work is not as easy to describe, and seeing a difference that development food aid makes – for instance, in helping a farmer to build an irrigation canal and have him become 10 times as productive as he was before, in Colombia, or helping a Bangladeshi woman to be able to learn a skill that she can then bring in much more income and more pride and more support to her family – these aren't things that are so easy to describe, and therefore our development portfolio is just not as big as it has been in the past.

CROSSETTE: In the development portfolio, are you also asking for help other than food aid in terms of the equipment or know-how or other things to help people develop their own agricultural skills?

BERTINI: Yes, Barbara, we essentially purchase technical expertise either in an individual country or from another UN agency, and then we use that to help assist a community. For instance, a community may decide – and we target the poorest of the poor communities, and the poorest of the poor people – and a community may decide, for instance, that it wants to develop fish farming, and so we would help recruit and pay for an

expert to show them how to do it, and not only how to get into the technical nature of growing fish, raising fish, but also about how to market the fish. And then the community may very well use the proceeds from the fish in order to go into another economic endeavour that's supportive of the people.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you asking Governments more for contributions of food than contributions of cash, or the other way around?

BERTINI: We're asking for both food and cash. Now, you mentioned surpluses before; when the World Food Programme was created 35 years ago, it was with surpluses primarily. But today there are not surpluses generally speaking from Governments, and almost every Government actually budgets for what it's going to contribute to WFP. Some contribute food, some contribute cash, some contribute only cash. We need both, because we need to be able to transport the food, and then we need to be able to manage the process and do the appropriate monitoring and assessments.

DEEN: On the question of resources, there has been a general, overall decline in development assistance, and a number of UN agencies like UNDP are cutting back. How is it affecting you?

BERTINI: Well, there has been a decline in development resources for the World Food Programme, but there's been an increase in emergency resources, in resources for war victims, for refugees; and so as a result our overall status has not been greatly affected. We do have our own internal reform efforts. We've been very aggressive about being able to improve the efficiency of the organization and being able to recruit people with the kind of skills we need for this increase in emergency work. We've put many programmes in place, like an inspector-general programme, in order to help review our programmes. But our budgets are changing because of the emergency needs and decreasing slightly because of development.

DEEN: Do you think the emergency needs will continue to increase, with all the ethnic conflicts that are taking place all over the world?

BERTINI: Unfortunately, I don't think they're going to go away any time soon, and that's very unfortunate for the millions of victims of these terrible wars and ethnic fighting.

CROSSETTE: For people who watch, it would be interesting to know what an emergency does to you. I mean, you've got your programmes in place, you're working on other things, and along comes something like, for example, the movement of hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps in the Great Lakes region of Africa, which we've seen several times in the last year or two. What does this do? Does this also force you to reassign people, to have to sort of reprogramme the agency kind of overnight when something like that happens?

BERTINI: Yes, we act immediately. If we have any sense that we can predict what might be happening, then we preposition food stocks so that we can move food immediately to the affected places. If we don't have any idea about what might be happening – and the first time of the major population shift out of Rwanda, really there wasn't a lot of prediction of that, so in that case we were able to borrow food immediately because of our development programmes. For instance, in Tanzania we had some food because of development, so we were able to immediately move some of the food in Tanzania that was in storage to serve the refugees, and we were able to do so, have the food there within 48 hours of the movement of the refugees.

CROSSETTE: Would that be taking food from the food-for-work programmes, or what?

BERTINI: Yes, food-for-work or school lunch or anything else, but then we replenish it. When a donor government then gives food, for instance in that case for Rwandan refugees, since we've already given some, borrowed some for them, we would repay the Tanzanian.

CROSSETTE: And these foodstuffs are largely the same for emergency? What sort of food in-kind donations do you ask for from countries? Or are these purchases? Or both?

BERTINI: Both. It's both in-kind contributions and purchases. But there would be a basic food – wheat, for instance, perhaps rice, depending on the nature or the place of the emergency; there would be oil, for instance; and there would be some kind of protein – beans or, depending on the emergency, it might even be fish.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Bertini, we're all pretty well aware of the prevalence of corruption in the world, in developed and developing countries. How do you avoid the situation where perhaps your food supplies end up on the black market and instead of helping poor people are being sold at a profit?

BERTINI: Well, we have an extensive network of monitors. In fact, our country office staff has increased in order to increase our monitoring capability so that we can look, we know what food went on the ship to begin with, what food comes off it, what food goes on the trucks or the trains, what food comes off it, what food is distributed, given to an NGO or to UNHCR or to the local government, and then spot checks of the food as it's distributed. Once we hear that there's any potential problem at all, we immediately look into it, and I can tell you it's a very tiny, tiny minority, 1 or 2 per cent of the potential food that's distributed. But we also have this new facility of an inspector-general, and we've had some –

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean just for WFP?

BERTINI: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Because there's a sort of an inspector-general for the whole UN system, Karl Theodor Paschke.

BERTINI: Yes. Well, we decided that the UN system was so large, if we waited for the inspector-general of the UN to be able to help us at WFP, we might wait a long time because he would have such a large portfolio; so we have created our own. And, for instance, one of our country directors called and said that there was some food leaking, but he couldn't find out where, but he was seeing it in the market. Our inspector-general went in unannounced to this country, went to the market, saw the food, went immediately to the minister in the Government, got his support, went to the police, surrounded the market and had all the people arrested, and then found the place where the food was leaking. And we've had a lot of success with this approach.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about waste from poor storage facilities? Is that a problem?

BERTINI: Once in a great while there's a storage problem. There might be a problem in the ship—the food might get wet in the ship coming over, or there might be a problem with storage, but, again, we do our best to provide modern storage facilities and to ensure the least possible loss. And when there is some small loss, it might be usable for livestock feeding, in which case we would sell it and then use the proceeds to buy food for people.

DEEN: Ms. Bertini, most of your food aid recipients, I believe, are from developing countries, but are there any food aid recipients who have progressed to a point where they have now become food donors?

BERTINI: Yes. This is a good news story about food aid. Food aid, when it works properly, is here to help individuals stay alive, and to help communities and countries grow. And so there are many countries who are now donors who used to be food aid recipients—South Korea, for instance, used to be a food aid recipient, Hungary used to be a food aid recipient, Singapore was a food aid recipient—

LITTLEJOHNS: Hungary is no longer hungry!

BERTINI: It's now a donor, and it's very exciting. And also we have countries that are graduating from the need for food aid, graduating from the need for development food aid. And this doesn't mean that countries no longer have any hungry people, even rich countries have hungry people, but there comes a point where the country, for instance, may belong to OECD, may become middle income, may have enough of its own resources so that it's the country's responsibility and not the international community's responsibility to feed the hungry people in that country. And we have about 20 countries out of the 90 in which we're currently involved who are actually going to graduate within the next year and a half.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme.

CROSSETTE: Some of your publications talk about, and we've talked about, hunger in a world of plenty or in a world full of food; but there are, every once in a while, predictions that the food supply in the world is perhaps going to shrink, and that certainly in major areas we've already seen fighting over fish, fish stocks and fishing grounds, and to some degree losses in production in wheat and other crops, grain crops. In your own agency, are you looking always at the future of food production also? And are there any concerns on the horizon that you see that might affect the way the world can feed itself or the way your agency can accumulate food?

BERTINI: Well, there are now 800 million hungry people in the world. That number has actually decreased over time. And the World Bank projections are such that they project that by 2005 there'll be about 600 million hungry people. So the number actually is going down. Also the production in every place except Africa has increased. And so, although there will be less people hungry, 600 million is still a totally unacceptable amount; one is an unacceptable amount. But the fact that there are still going to be so many hungry people while the production is going to increase means that people are going to be even more desperately poor and there's going to be an even greater need for food aid to help them bridge the gap. And some recent research suggests that in the same year, 2005, we would need three times as much food aid as we have now in order to serve even less people, because – I mean, more people but a lesser amount of hungry poor, because people will be much poorer. And although there are some very, very good stories in Africa, in different countries in Africa, it still remains that the continent in totality is the area of biggest concern over the long term.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Bertini, you gave a press conference the other day with UNICEF and the United Nations Humanitarian Affairs Department, and you concentrated very much on the problems of Iraq. Carol Bellamy, the head of UNICEF, said that 4500 children under the age of five are dying every month of hunger and disease because Iraq is unable to obtain food and medicines for them. Tell us what – how serious the problem is in Iraq.

BERTINI: Well, the problem is very serious in Iraq. We're trying to serve over 2 million people with food assistance in Iraq. You know, hunger is the kind of a problem that doesn't go away unless someone, not only for one day, but for long term, has the ability to have the food to sustain themselves. So when it becomes chronic and when for months and months people don't have enough food to sustain themselves, then the problem becomes worse and worse. And that's what we're seeing now. And it used to be that there was

general food distribution in the country, and we hope that if there is an agreement on the food-for-oil programme that there will be general food distribution, but we will still have hundreds of thousands of people who still are very vulnerable and will need food assistance.

LITTLEJOHNS: Governments seem to be reluctant to contribute to a programme for Iraq. Is that part of the difficulty?

BERTINI: The Iraq programme had never been fully funded, and I think some Governments are now waiting for the food-for-oil programme to go into effect.

DEEN: On the question of Iraq, what are your views on economic sanctions as a weapon? Because there is an argument that these economic sanctions have a devastating impact on women and children but not on the rulers of these countries.

BERTINI: The United Nations, in its wisdom, chooses to do things like economic sanctions, and I'm part of the United Nations.

CROSSETTE: When you meet reluctant donors or people who say, "Why should we be supporting these people when the rulers have the money and they're building palaces?" or whatever other stories we hear, what's the pitch that you can make? What's the explanation you can make for why this is so important?

BERTINI: If people are hungry, I don't think we can put up other reasons why the international community doesn't provide assistance to those who are hungry. If we only sent food to those places where the person in charge was a wonderful man or woman who was very sensitive and did wonderful things, then there would be an awful lot more hungry people. And frankly, if all the rulers were that strong and that good, we probably wouldn't need to be sending food assistance. So I think from the United Nations perspective, and from any humanitarian perspective, we have to send food where people are hungry. And that means sometimes it's a place that is politically unpopular.

LITTLEJOHNS: You didn't want to reply to Thalif Deen's question, understandably, but the sanctions resolution against Iraq explicitly exempts food and medicine from the embargo. So why is it that there is such a shortage of food and medicines in Iraq? Is it simply they don't have the foreign exchange to purchase supplies?

BERTINI: I think there's a whole range of reasons, and I think perhaps they would be better to answer that than I.

DEEN: On the question of agencies, the UN system has three agencies dealing with food and agriculture – the FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme, and IFAD, the International Fund for Agriculture and Development. There are accusations that there's too much of duplication and there's no coordination amongst these three agencies. What is your response to this?

BERTINI: Well, I think those kinds of accusations are absolutely wrong. We each do different things. We all have food in our name. That doesn't mean that we overlap. The World Food Programme is the agency that provides food assistance to needy people, and neither of the other agencies do that. And that's our main purpose. The FAO provides technical expertise, statistical information and so forth, and that is not duplicated by the other two agencies. And the International Fund for Agricultural Development – actually "agriculture" is in their name – is almost like a mini-World Bank to help with loans for small agricultural development. We have many, many projects in common with IFAD, and we – there's a wonderful way that we can work together, when we're, for instance, providing food assistance to a woman who's taking out loans so that she can develop a business on her own and she needs some food assistance to carry her through the training and the beginning of her business. And with the Food and Agriculture Organization we hire them on a regular basis to provide technical assistance to our work.

DEEN: You had a World Food Council, right? Was it eliminated, or what happened to it?

BERTINI: It doesn't – it may still exist on paper, but it doesn't exist any more as an entity. It was a group to organize agricultural ministers periodically to meet.

CROSSETTE: You talked a little earlier about every country having hungry people, including rich countries. Maybe you could go back to some of your food-for-work programmes, talk about some, or one or two, that are probably very successful. And do any of these have lessons perhaps for a country like the United States or another wealthy country with pockets of poverty and hunger?

BERTINI: Yes. I think that there are lessons to be learned. First of all, the most important thing I think that everyone tries to avoid in any country is avoiding the situation where people are so dependent on food aid that they expect it all the time and don't look for opportunities to help themselves and their families. And so that's a constant concern that everyone has, be it in the US or in any of our programmes. But since so few of our programmes are actually just straight food distribution, except when people are in desperate need of that food, our food-for-work I think can be in some cases a good example. First of all, because the communities and the families decide themselves in many cases what's necessary, then they can use that resource in order to improve their own community situation, and at the same time they're receiving food that's beneficial for themselves and their families.

DEEN: You're primarily concerned with the supply side of – supplying of food for people who are needy, but what about the demand side? What about population? Do you

have any relationship to the rising population and what types of steps you'd take to help them?

BERTINI: Well, certainly we work in coordination with all of the UN programmes and with the UNFPA and with the decisions that were made on the part of the international community at the conference in Cairo.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Population Conference? Was that it?

BERTINI: The Population Conference. But we have – there's no "buts" to it, we do our best to support this kind of work as well. We may, for instance, share a project within a health centre where food is used as an incentive for women to come to a health centre, and then at the health centre the woman would get various kinds of information about family planning, about her own health, about her pregnancy, about breastfeeding, or about any other issues that are important to her. So that's clearly an issue. Nonetheless, no matter how many people there are in the world, it's our job to try to do our best to reach those that are hungry and poor and to be able to keep people alive through providing food aid and to be able to help people help themselves so that they are no longer in future generations hungry and poor.

CROSSETTE: Aren't you finding that in some cases giving the food to women in the family has been very successful? Some of these things have also grown out of the national conferences and the role of women in development and in caring for families in times of crisis. Have you experimented with this? Providing the women with the initial food?

BERTINI: Barbara, we've made this a major part of our programmes because we have found through various activities the natural position – that food is a woman's issue. Women are the ones in every society that are the ones who gather the food, who prepare the food, who serve the food. And so therefore it makes sense, wherever possible, for us to direct food to women. And there are also all sorts of studies that show that if that's done it's much more beneficial for the economic well-being of the family than if food is given to the men. And it is their jobs in the families, and we ought to support that job and we ought to help them.

CROSSETTE: And sometimes even in marketing isn't that – isn't it also often the case that women are given food even when it's going to be distributed, it's distributed through women rather than through some other marketing – or not – I shouldn't – social marketing.

BERTINI: Much better when it's distributed through women. For instance, we have a programme in the southern Sudan where there are community groups and there are 15 people in each community group, but there's a rule that at least half have to be women. And in the southern Sudan, where we can't always get food in every day, every week, it's

sporadic – the delivery, for a variety of reasons – these committees decide who are the poorest families in the community, and it is these women who know who are the poorest, who are the most hungry. And so when the food comes, then they prioritize who gets the food first.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Bertini, we have less than a minute left. Do you provide seeds and agricultural tools, for example, to developing countries so that they can increase their own crop production?

BERTINI: This is one place where we don't cross purposes with FAO. They provide seeds and tools, but we deliver them along with the food assistance to farmers.

LITTLEJOHNS: And do you have any kind of programme to encourage conservation of food and preservation of food supplies?

BERTINI: We have all sorts of programmes, but we have many conservation programmes relative to environmental conservation and to using food aid to help rebuild the environment.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Bertini, it's a very interesting subject, and thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme. She was interviewed by Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Barbara Crossette of the New York Times.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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